

The Iowa Boy

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Keosauqua, Ia. -- It was another wonderful weekend in Van Buren County, that charming little haven in southeast Iowa that doesn't have a single stoplight or fast-food franchise.

As I spent two days riding the county with 400 people on the 11th annual Bike Van Buren, it hit me again how the faster and dizzier life gets elsewhere, the better this place becomes.

Not only is the pace slower -- and the citizens here prize that -- but there's also the incredible beauty of the Des Moines River, a quarter-mile or more wide as it meanders 40 miles through the county.

One of the prettiest and biggest state parks, Lacey-Keosauqua, is here along the river. There is plenty of fascinating history, since white settlement began in the 1830's here. The Mormon Trek crossed the county in 1846 and '47.

You can stay in 100-year-old hotels and inns -- the Hotel Manning and the Mansion Inn in Keosauqua, the Mason House in Bentonsport and some fine B&Bs.

Artists and craftsmakers have been moving in here the last 25 years, and they sell their work in gift shops throughout the county. A significant population of Amish and Mennonites has been building over the same period, and they sell their crafts and baked goods in shops and from stands at the end of their farm driveways.

There are several good, plenty-fast-enough, full-service places to eat. One of Iowa's finest restaurants, Ben and Rose Hendricks' Bonaparte Retreat, is in a converted old mill on the riverbank at Bonaparte.

None of the above is news to Iowans. We've been watching Van Buren Countians build their tourism industry since the 1970's. But when RAGBRAI XXV went through the county in July and I saw how our riders from out-of-state fell in love with the place, I was reminded again what a treasure this is.